Lesson 27
Matthew 28; Luke 24; John 20–21

A detailed comparison of how each of these writers tells the story of Jesus’s resurrection would be both interesting and enlightening. There is a great deal to be learned from thinking about the similarities and the differences between the ways these three writers relate those events. But there isn’t space enough here for such a comparison. To keep the study materials for this lesson to a reasonable length, this chapter will focus on Matthew 28, Luke 24 (more on the former than the latter), and John 21.

Nevertheless, we can begin with a few questions of comparison: Matthew tells us of an earthquake that no one else mentions. John tells us that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and then told the disciples, among whom Peter and John returned to see the empty tomb. Mark tells us that Mary and other women saw an angel outside the tomb and a second inside, but Luke and John tell us that they see two angels inside. John and Mark tell us that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene outside the tomb, though Matthew tells us that he appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary as they were leaving the tomb.

What do you make of these differences? Is there one story of which each of these is a part? Are we reading separate remembered accounts with the differences that memory often creates? Or are we seeing other things at work in these
differences? And what difference do the differences make? How would you answer someone who used these differences to argue that the New Testament is inconsistent and, therefore, not to be relied on?

Matthew 28

Verse 1: Who was the other Mary? (See Matthew 27:57.)
How do you explain the chronology here: how can it be both “the end of the sabbath” and dawn since the Sabbath extends from sunup to sundown?

Verse 2: The verse tells us that there was a great earthquake because the angel descended. That’s what for means when it begins the second clause: “for the angel of the Lord descended.” Why would the descent of an angel cause an earthquake?

“Look!” would be a more colloquial translation of the Greek than “and behold.”

The angel rolls back the stone only when the two Marys come to see the tomb. Does Jesus leave the tomb at that time, or has he already left?

Verses 2–5: Why don’t the women faint when the guards are so frightened that they do?

Is Matthew using irony when he says that the guards of Jesus’s tomb “became as dead men”?

Is it important to what Matthew is saying that the only witnesses are the two Marys, that the guards are unconscious? How so?
The resurrection itself has no witnesses, though there are many witnesses to the resurrected Christ. The Gospels tell us of those who see Jesus after his resurrection, but there appears to have been no human witness of the event of the resurrection. Why do you think that is?

**Verse 5:** Why does the angel describe Jesus as “which was crucified” rather than “your Master” or “who wrought the atonement” or in some similar way?

**Verse 6:** “He is risen” translates a Greek clause that can more accurately be translated “He has been raised.” What does that passive construction imply?

Why is it important for the angel to remind the two Marys that Jesus had told them he would be resurrected?

How well had those prophecies of resurrection prepared Jesus’s followers, like these two, for the event itself? Were they surprised? If so, why? What might that tell us about the nature of prophecy?

The angel invites the women to see the place where Jesus lay, to see that the tomb is empty. Do they take up his invitation? Whichever way you answer, how does your answer affect our understanding of what happened and its meaning for the two Marys?

**Verse 7:** Why are they told to tell only the disciples? Why weren’t they told to tell their message more widely?

In Matthew 26:32 Jesus told the disciples that he would go before them into Galilee. Here the angel tells them he has already gone there. Why do you think he went to Galilee to
reunite with his disciples rather than do it where they were, in Jerusalem?

**Verse 8:** What does it tell us that the women’s feelings were of fear and joy at the same time?

**Verse 9:** The angel told the two Marys to go to the disciples and tell them what they had seen. But as they are on their way, they are met by Jesus himself. Why do you think the events unfold in that way? Why doesn’t Jesus either let them take their message to the disciples as his angel instructed, on the one hand, or appear to them at the tomb, on the other?

When Jesus meets the women, he says, literally, “Rejoice,” though the Greek word used was a common greeting, used as we would use “Hello.” However, in this instance, the literal meaning is also appropriate. What do you make of the women’s reaction?

**Verse 10:** Jesus tells them not to fear, but there is no evidence that they do. Why does he say that to them?

Jesus repeats his instructions that the disciples will meet with him in Galilee, taking us back to the question (verse 7) of why they must go to Galilee to meet with him. This seems to be important to Matthew, since he repeats it. Why is it important to him?

**Verses 11–15:** What do these verses explain? Why was that important to the early Church? How might it be meaningful to us?

**Verses 17–20:** Would the last clause of the verse be a surprise to a first-time reader? Why does Matthew tell the story that way?
Why is it important to him to mention that there were doubters among the disciples? What effect might Jesus’s words have had on the doubters? Why doesn’t he say anything to them about their doubts? Jesus says that they should go and teach because he has all power. Can you explain that relation between their call to teach and his omnipotence?

What does Jesus mean when he says, “I am with you, even unto the end of the world [literally, “the end of the age”]”?  

Luke 24

Verses 1–11: Why does Luke wait until verse 10 to tell us who came to the tomb?

Notice that the language that each of the evangelists uses to tell the story of the resurrection is simple and straightforward. Why did they choose that kind of language to describe such an important and dramatic event rather than more dramatic language?

What does the word remember mean in verses 7–8? Had Jesus’s followers actually forgotten that he told them these things would happen?

Why does news of the resurrection first come to women rather than to the presidency of the Church or other priesthood holders? (Compare John 20:11–18.)

Why does the angel’s description of what had to be focus on the resurrection rather than on the experience in the Garden of Gethsemane?

The phrase “idle tales” is weaker than the Greek which says, literally, “things said in a delirium.” Why don’t the apostles believe the women?
Verse 12: How does Peter respond to the empty tomb? Does he believe the women’s story? If so, why?

Verses 13–35: We don’t know where Emmaus was. Since the name means “Hot Spring,” it could have been any of a number of places. Wherever it was, it seems to have been about a two-hour walk from Jerusalem.¹

Verse 13 says “two of them” were on their way to Emmaus. Two of whom? Why doesn’t Luke tell us their names or give some other way of identifying them? We later learn the name of one of them, Cleopas (verse 18).

Compare and contrast the experience of these two people with that of the apostles (Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:36–38, 41; John 20:20, 24–25). How quickly does each recognize the Lord?

What is the Lord doing when these two recognize him? How is that significant?

Does each group believe as soon as they recognize him?

In verse 15 the Greek word translated reasoned could also be translated questioned. Does that alternative translation change the meaning significantly?

In Luke’s version of the story, the first words that Jesus is recorded as saying after his resurrection are in verse 17: “What are you talking about as you walk?” Is there any symbolic significance in this for us?

Note that most modern translations differ from the King James in verse 17. The King James Version includes “and are sad” as part of what Jesus said. Most translators, though, take the Greek phrase to be part of the description of those
to whom Jesus is speaking; that is, responding to the question, “they stopped, looking sad.” Here is a more modern rendering of the verse as a whole: “He said to them ‘What are you talking about as you walk?’ and they stopped, looking sad.” Does that change the meaning of the story at all?

The tradition says that Cleopas (verse 18) was Jesus’s paternal uncle, the brother of Joseph. Cleopas’s son, Symeon, succeeded James (Jesus’s brother) as bishop of Jerusalem. If that tradition reflects the truth, why would Jesus appear to his uncle rather than to someone else?

What does verse 19 show about these disciples’ understanding of who Jesus was?

The Greek word translated trusted in verse 21 is probably better translated were hoping. Does that change your understanding?


Why doesn’t Luke tell us how the two travelers responded to Jesus’s sharp rebuke in verse 25? For what does he rebuke them? Is their failure that they haven’t recognized him, or is it something else?

What does it mean to be “slow of heart”?

Is there a message for us in this rebuke of these two disciples?

Given what we see in verse 27, how should we read the Hebrew Bible?

After Jesus has expounded the scriptures to Cleopas and his fellow traveler, do they understand what he has said? Why don’t they recognize him yet?
How does it happen that Jesus, the guest, takes on the duties of the head of the household to bless the bread at this meal (verse 30)?

Is it significant that verse 30 uses exactly the same language as did Luke 22:19a? Why does this thing that Jesus does open their eyes when seeing him in person, speaking with him, and having their hearts burn as he expounded the scriptures did not?

What effect is created by the eleven apostles telling the two of the Lord’s appearance to Peter before the latter tell of their experience on the way to Emmaus? Is that significant to the meaning of this story?

Many have seen a chiasmus in these verses:

A Verses 13–14 Introduction: the disciples are alone

B Verses 15–19a The narrative frame

C Verses 19b–27 The disciples’ dialogue with Jesus, with the angelic announcement of the resurrection (verse 23b) at the center

B' Verses 28–32 The narrative frame

A' Verses 33–35 Conclusion: the disciples are alone

There are other parallels within the story, but this gives a good overview of it. It also has many other literary features, which have been noted by many careful readers. Why has Luke (or his source; compare Luke 1:1–3) crafted this particular story so carefully?

Verses 36–49: Notice how the disciples are described: terrified and afraid (verse 37), troubled and doubting (verse 308
Why are the apostles frightened? The two people on the way to Emmaus were not. What are the differences between these two events?

What does Luke mean when he says “they believed not [i.e., disbelieved] for joy” (verse 41)? What does it mean to disbelieve for joy?

In verse 44, to what does “these are the words” refer?

Why does the Lord say to them “while I was yet with you” (italics added)? In other words, why does he use the past tense? After all, he is with them when he speaks—or is he suggesting that he is no longer with them in the same way?

To both the people on the way to Emmaus and to the eleven apostles, the risen Lord expounds the scriptures. Why?

To what does “these things” refer in verse 48?

The Greek word from which we get the word *apostle* means “messenger.” Does that deepen your understanding of what the scriptures teach? What is the message of these witnesses?

**John 21**

**Verses 1–3:** Why do you think the disciples have decided to go fishing? Many have read this as a sign that their faith is weak: they have decided to return to their former occupation, to give up the ministry to which they have been called. Do you think that judgment is correct or too harsh? If it is too harsh, how do you explain what is happening?

In verse 4, why can’t the disciples recognize Jesus?

Is it significant that John, “that disciple whom Jesus loved,” was the first to recognize Jesus (verse 7)?
Do the events of verses 9 and 12–13 help answer the question about what the disciples were doing?

Do you have any idea why John would tell us the exact number of fish caught? Is it symbolically significant? For example, the early Christian writer Jerome (347–420; the son of the historian Eusebius) tells us that writers of his time believed that there were 153 species of fish in the world.3 That seems unlikely, but is there perhaps another way of understanding this as symbolic?

This is very odd: “None of the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? Knowing that it was the Lord” (verse 12). It seems obvious that if I already know who someone is I won’t ask, “Who are you?” So what is John saying in those two sentences?

When the Lord asks Peter, “Lovest thou me more than these?” is he asking, “Do you love me more than the other apostles love me?” or “Do you love me more than you love them?”

What would each repetition of the question “Lovest thou me?” (verses 15–17) have done to Peter?

What is the significance of the Lord’s request that Peter be a shepherd? How is the figure of the shepherd used in scripture?

On its face, verse 18 looks like a description of what happens to a person as he or she ages: when you are young, you clothe yourself and go wherever you wish, but when you are old someone else must help you dress and take you where he or she wants you to go. How, then, is it a prophecy of Peter’s death (verse 19)?
Why does the Lord first humble Peter with his question about love (verses 15–17), then prophesy how Peter will die (verse 18) and conclude by saying, “Follow me” (verse 19). What is the coherence of that sequence of ideas?

If John the Beloved was not to die, as Latter-day Saints teach, then why does he include verse 23b, which says that Jesus didn’t say John wouldn’t die? For what is verse 23b a corrective? What is the emphasis in the last clause of the verse, the repetition of Jesus’s comment to Peter in verse 22?